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SUBJECT: UNGA FOURTH COMMITTEE DEBATE ON UNITED NATIONS  
RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY

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¶1. SUMMARY: The UN General Assembly's Special Political and Decolonization Committee (the Fourth Committee) held its general debate on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on November 2 - 3. The Commissioner General of UNRWA opened the debate with a report detailing the Agency's operations, reform, and financing. The special rapporteur of the working group on financing highlighted the shortfalls in the UNRWA operating budget. Twenty six member states and two observer missions spoke during the debate. There was unanimous praise of UNRWA's work and multiple calls for more funding for the agency. Arab states and the Palestinian Observer Mission used the debate to accuse Israel of violating international law.

#### UNRWA Report on 2008 Operations

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¶2. UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd stated that there is a funding shortfall that UNRWA is at risk of suspending essential services. A 12 million dollar shortfall would mean that the agency could run out of money for salaries before the end of the year. AbuZayd said that the "scale and intensity of Israel's offensive (December 27, 2008) in Gaza were unprecedented in the recent history of the conflict." She noted that UNRWA had been active during the conflict in providing relief services and is now attempting to rebuild UN facilities and homes of the refugees, but is hampered by the Israeli "blockade" of Gaza. AbuZayd described the West Bank as a "shattered economic space" due to the separation barrier. She noted that in Lebanon, UNRWA is working towards the reconstruction of the Nahr El Bared camp and is working with the Lebanese government to help the refugees.

¶3. AbuZayd discussed the reform of UNRWA's managerial structure and functions. She stated that the decades of inadequate resources have had an adverse effect on UNRWA's management capacity, but the organizational development process started in 2006 is yielding positive results. The Commissioner-General stated that she would be retiring at the end of 2009 after nine years with the agency.

¶4. In the interactive dialogue after the report of the Commissioner-General, the Palestinian Observer, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon spoke -- all praised the work of UNRWA and attacked Israeli actions. The Palestinian Observer stated that UNRWA allowed Palestinians to survive the "onslaught and aggression" committed by Israel in Gaza and asked about financial claims against Israel for UNRWA facilities destroyed during the conflict. Lebanon, Syria and Egypt noted the Israeli "blockade" of Gaza. The Commissioner-General responded that they are still working towards resolution of the compensation claims and that the blockade, although legally not considered one even by UNRWA's

own legal advisor, hampers access of UNRWA staff and materials and has significantly slowed services and reconstruction.

#### UNRWA report of Financing

¶5. The Special Rapporteur of the Working Group of the Financing of UNRWA Andreas Lovold (Norway) noted that demand for UNRWA's services continues to grow as while funding remains static - creating a budget gap of 89 million for ¶2009. Norway has worked to increase funding from a broader base of donors but the funding gap is projected to increase to 116 million by 2011, unless a permanent solution for funding UNRWA is found. He called on G-20 members to become more involved and the Arab states to honor funding pledges. He also advocated that more of UNRWA's funding come from UN regular budgets, thus making funding more predictable and equitably distributed.

#### General Debate Highlights

¶6. Palestinian Observer Mission: The Palestinian Deputy Permanent Observer said that 4.7 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants continue to be stateless. She expressed hope for resolving the refugee problem in accordance with international law and UN resolutions but expressed doubt about the chances of that due to Israeli action. The Palestinian delegate called for a rejection of Israeli rhetoric denying responsibility for the plight of Palestinian refugees. She stated that the Israel "military onslaught" on December 2008 and its aftermath, particularly the "immoral, inhumane, unlawful blockade" had gravely impacted the Palestinian people. She noted that in December

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2008 Israeli forces destroyed the main UNRWA warehouse and UN schools "where civilians were known to be sheltering." She concluded by noting that the return of refugees is a core final status issue - key to peace in the region.

¶7. Israel: Israel thanked UNRWA for its work and reiterated support for its humanitarian mission. It noted that Israel will continue to "do its utmost to facilitate UNRWA's operations, subject to the upholding of its own security." Israel criticized politicized statements by other delegations whose governments are not engaged in supporting UNRWA in ways that could improve the conditions of Palestinian refugees on the ground. Israel called on UNRWA officials not to exceed the humanitarian mission by becoming involved in activities of a controversial political nature, stating that this undermines its neutrality and harms its humanitarian role. Israel noted that it was prevented from addressing the 60th anniversary of UNRWA commemorative event. Israel noted that the thousands of rockets fired at Israeli civilians from Gaza and Hamas's placement of weapons in the midst of civilian populations and near UN facilities deliberately endangered civilians. Israel reiterated that its goal is to resolve the refugee problem and continue negotiations, but that the Palestinian Authority will not resume bilateral peace talks.

¶8. The Palestinian Observer Mission exercised a right of reply to respond to Israel's statement saying that the Palestinian delegate was "surprised by Israel's support of UNRWA despite the restrictions on staff, destruction of facilities and taxing of goods." The Palestinian delegate also stated that Israel was not barred from the 60 year anniversary of UNRWA, but chose not to participate as they were not accorded a speaking role in line with the criteria established by the UNRWA Advisory Commission.

¶9. Senior Area Advisor Laura Ross delivered the United States statement, emphasizing that the US is the largest donor to UNRWA, and supports the Palestinians, including refugees, through USAID projects and direct budget assistance to the

Palestinian Authority. Ross noted the importance of UNRWA focusing on the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality in its highly charged working environment in order to fulfill its mandate. She said the US views UNRWA's role as important in encouraging stability and moderation in the region and promoting the human development of the Palestinian refugees. Ross stated that the U.S. remains concerned about the chronic shortfalls in UNRWA's budget and their effect on UNRWA's ability to provide humanitarian assistance, and accordingly asked states to redouble efforts to secure funding for UNRWA.

¶10. Sweden (EU Presidency): The EU noted that UNRWA has improved the living conditions and human dignity of millions of Palestinian refugees and their communities over the last 60 years. It stated that the EU is the largest donor to UNRWA, contributing over 60 percent of the budget. It condemned the shelling of UNRWA facilities in Gaza during the conflict and deplored the civilian casualties. It called for the immediate and unconditional opening of the crossings for the flow of humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons to and from Gaza.

¶11. Egypt (NAM chair): Egypt began by noting the inalienable right of return and fair compensation for the Palestinian people according to General Assembly Resolution 194. Egypt expressed concern with Israel's illegal occupation and systematic violations to international humanitarian and human rights law, and UN resolutions, citing in particular the targeting of UNRWA's personnel and obstruction of General Assembly-mandated activities. Egypt said living conditions, particularly in Gaza, suffer as "a result of the continuing punitive measures and blockade imposed by Israel and its military aggression, which caused the death and injury of thousands of Palestinians and widespread damage and destruction to Palestinian civilian infrastructure and UN facilities". Accordingly the NAM called for reconstruction to begin immediately and the sustained and permanent opening of Gaza's border crossings.

¶12. Lebanon and Syria: Lebanon noted that the fact that Palestinian refugees had been uprooted from their homeland and unable to return their homes for 60 years is more important than the funding of UNRWA and must be the focus of the international community. Lebanon stated that Israel is fully responsible for the suffering of the Palestinian refugees and the international community must hold "Israel accountable to its obligations under international law, including humanitarian law and human rights law." Lebanon said that Israel should bear financial responsibility for the

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damages incurred by Israel's "deliberate attacks" on UNRWA facilities, and condemned the "blockade" of Gaza and the disruption of humanitarian access in the West Bank. It welcomed UNRWA's commitment to organizational development through the reform and strengthening of its management structure and processes. Syria stated that Israel has flouted all resolutions passed by the UN on the issue of refugees and has prevented the application of resolution 184 by introducing "alien settlers from all parts of the world, in order to dominate the homes, territories, and country of the Palestine people." Syria claimed that Israel turns a "deaf ear" to established facts in United Nations reports such as the Goldstone report and refuses to pay compensation for bombarding UN buildings. Syria stated that it spent 150 million dollars in 2009 for education, social and health services, food provisions and security for refugees.

¶13. The following additional countries spoke during the debate: Cuba, South Africa, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Norway, Vietnam, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, the Holy See, Mexico on behalf of the Rio group, Senegal, Japan, Sudan, China, Morocco, India and Australia. Australia condemned "all the Hamas actions that deliberately endanger civilian lives." Norway stated that

the final status issue of right of return remains unsolved, leaving millions in encampments with no end to their situation in sight. It noted that even if a peace process was established and a solution to the refugee issue found, UNRWA services would be needed for at least another 15 years.

Wolff